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## AGRICULTURAL LIFE IN PALESTINE.

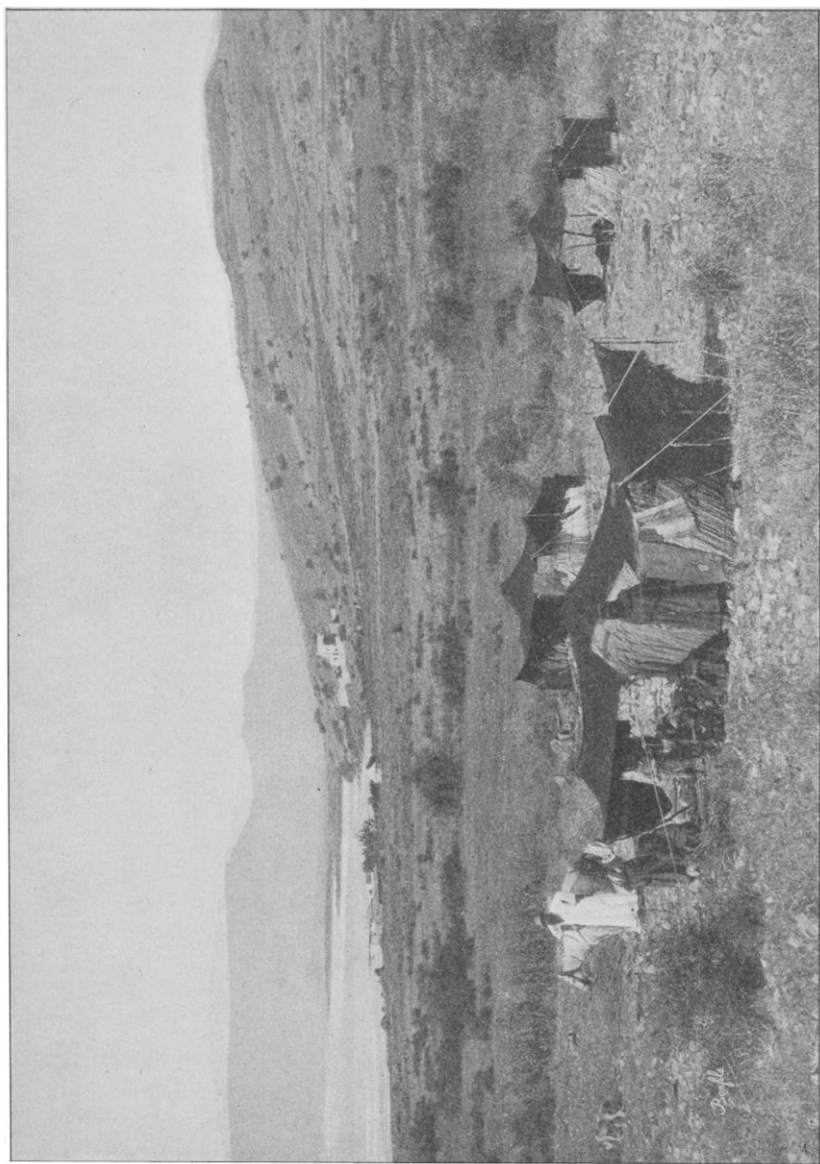
By DR. E. W. G. MASTERMAN, F.R.C.S., F.R.G.S.,  
Jerusalem, Syria.

It has been my lot to meet a great many visitors to Palestine during the past six years or so. Very frequently I have heard such people say that a visit to the Holy Land makes the Bible a new book to them. With such a view I have very much sympathy. But often people of a narrower school point out one thing and another in eastern life and exclaim, or, worse still, write: "How much this confirms the truth of the Bible!" Now, people who talk like this lay themselves open to very ready criticism. No one disputes that the Bible originates in the East—the unchanging East, as it is justly called—and therefore, though to go to the East and find men and women living just such outward lives as the patriarchs did, to see every parable a living picture today, to see the crowds of halt and lame and blind around you everywhere, and the lepers crying out "unclean, unclean" on the same spots as nineteen centuries ago, *is* very striking and *does*, in a marvelous degree, make the whole Bible history vivid, yet *it is not* a proof of more than the undisputed fact that the Bible is an eastern book, written by easterns and saturated with orientalism.

All I can hope to do, therefore, is to point out very briefly a few, necessarily a very few, of the innumerable illustrations we see in daily life of Bible customs. The subject is so vast that I must, to a large extent, rely on the reader's applying his own Bible references to the customs I shall hastily sketch: to attempt.



AIN JALUD



THE SHORE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE NEAR BETHSAIDA

at all fully to draw the parallels between the modern and the biblical customs would fill volumes.

First, I propose to speak briefly of the ordinary life of the people. There are three great divisions of the people: the townsfolk, the *medanén*—shop people, merchants, etc.; the *fellahín*, or villagers; and the *bedouín*, or nomads. The last two have

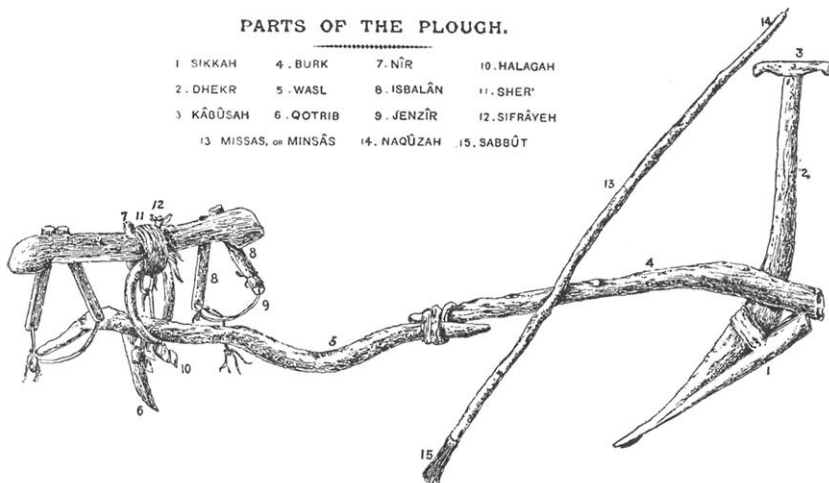


PLOWING IN SYRIA

been so very largely untouched by western civilization that they furnish today the best illustrations of Bible customs. The *fellahín* will illustrate the incidents of the New Testament, while the *bedouín* in a hundred ways recall those of the patriarchs and of the wandering of the exodus.

The *fellah*, or villager, is primarily an agriculturist. The harvests of Palestine are entirely regulated by the rainfall, which is very different from ours, and to some extent much more regular. Visit Palestine about September, and what will you find? Almost everywhere the ground is baked and parched;

in places the earth has so dried that deep cracks are formed. Much of it is absolutely bare, mostly by the simple drying up of the vegetation, but in other places through the artificial burning of the weeds and thistles over the hillsides. The whole landscape is in simmering heat, the very winds being often the hot southeastern ones known as the "sirocco." More hopeless looking land for fertility one could hardly conceive. Since the previous May probably not a drop of rain has fallen. The



THE PLOW OF SYRIA

[From the Palestine Exploration Fund *Quarterly Statement*, 1891]

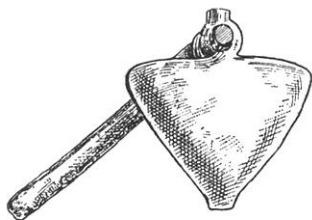
scanty springs that supply the villages are daily diminishing. The women who come to draw the water for their families have, in some localities, to wait hours until they all of them have their water-pots filled. October comes and often passes with no relief—all nature seems to gasp. Then, after a few days, in which the rain-clouds from Egypt pass rapidly over the heavens, come a few showers, and then, perhaps, two or three days of rain—the foretaste of "the former<sup>2</sup> rains." What a change! The dry-baked earth drinks up the cool drops,<sup>2</sup> and the smell of the damp soil pervades the air with pleasant freshness.<sup>3</sup> Out over every hillside and in all the valleys you see the *fellahin*

<sup>1</sup> Deut. 11 : 14.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isa. 45 : 8.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 44 : 3.

hard at work tilling the soil. All the country around is alive. The plows are of the rudest sort, and very like those depicted in Egyptian monuments, changed little from long before Israel existed as a nation at all. They are even now almost entirely of wood, and the *fellah* carries his plow easily on his shoulder to his

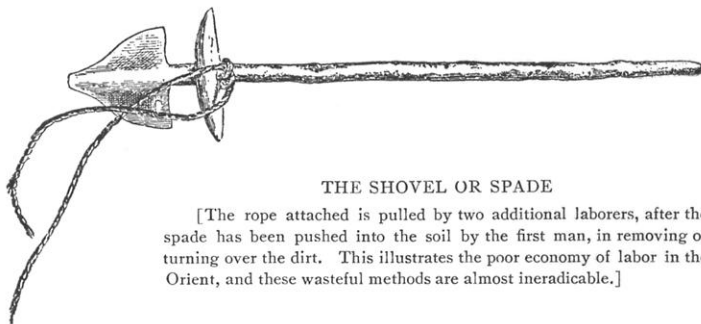


THE HOE

work. Oxen—sometimes an ox and a donkey, or even a donkey and a camel—are employed. As the *fellah* drives his yoke before him, he guides his plow with one hand and thrusts at the cattle's flanks with the pointed stick called the "goad." The work is accompanied by continual cries and

shouts till all the hillsides ring. The sower follows with the seed, which he scatters broadcast. A harrow of rough brushwood, like a broadened broom, which follows, carries it into the soil. Seedtime comes usually about November, but if "the former rains" are delayed, it may be a little before Christmas, for plowing is impossible before the earth is moistened.

How many Scripture comparisons have we already touched upon! "As the rain cometh down . . . and watereth the earth



THE SHOVEL OR SPADE

[The rope attached is pulled by two additional laborers, after the spade has been pushed into the soil by the first man, in removing or turning over the dirt. This illustrates the poor economy of labor in the Orient, and these wasteful methods are almost ineradicable.]

and maketh it bring forth and bud . . . so shall my word be." How much more this means to one who has seen the dry-baked earth, the showers, and within a few days the tiny plants rising on all sides!

The oxen, then as now the standard of wealth in the country;<sup>4</sup> the yoke and Christ's yoke;<sup>5</sup> the goad and him to whom

<sup>4</sup>Gen. 32:5.

<sup>5</sup>Matt. 11:30.

it was said, "It is hard for thee to kick against the goad"<sup>6</sup>—all have their lessons. But of all Scripture pictures how little can those who only know western lands begin to realize the homely accuracy of the "parable of the sower"!<sup>7</sup> Our acres of well-kept, plowed fields do not suggest the little patches of plowed lands in the hilly country; the great slabs of rock, with "no depth of earth," rising here and there from the midst of the field; the well-trodden, hard, rock-like path on which the seed has no protection from the birds, and the numerous outskirts where year by year the great thistles grow, often to the height of a man, and "choke the seed."

After a few weeks of comparatively fine weather, the real winter rains come down. They last usually about six or eight weeks, and during that time, in the mountains at any rate, three-quarters of the rain of the whole of the year falls. It is a miserable season for the country folk, and they largely stay indoors. If the season is a severe one, certain districts of the country become actually flooded and others quite marshy. Many of the *wadies*, which for eight or nine months are dry, are filled with a raging torrent,<sup>8</sup> and houses built insecurely are carried away. This is the idea of a house built in the sandy "wady" bottom, as against one built on the rocky hillside. The utter dryness of the spot so many months would make fear of a flood seem ridiculous to one unacquainted with the winter conditions.

As the period of rain is so short, the people are obliged to preserve as much as possible in rock-cut cisterns, and in Jerusalem itself all, or practically all, the water is thus preserved. But not only in the towns is this necessary; all vineyards must have cisterns. In one ancient vineyard of not more than two acres I counted about fifty cisterns; but in what condition? That described by the prophet:<sup>9</sup> "broken cisterns that can hold no water." Cisterns require constant attention, as the rocks in which they are cut are full of cracks, and these must be constantly cemented to prevent the escape of their contents.

Many of the "wells" spoken of in the Bible are really cisterns; Jacob's well, at which our Lord drank, was almost certainly

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:5.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 13:1-9.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 17:27.

<sup>9</sup> Jer. 2:13.

a deep underground cistern. The children of Israel found, you will remember, many of these cisterns ready-dug<sup>10</sup> for them on their arrival.

The winter rains cease at the end of February or the beginning of March, and the sunshine rapidly brings on the rising barley and wheat ; but it would ripen all too rapidly, with small ears and



SHEPHERD TENDING HIS FLOCK

stunted stalks, but for "the latter rains." These showers occur in the latter part of March and in April, and occasionally one or two in May. A good harvest requires a good "latter rain;" it is very different from the winter downpour, and the days between these showers are the loveliest in the whole year.<sup>11</sup> The barley harvest<sup>12</sup> precedes the wheat by about a month, and naturally begins earliest, as soon as March, in the Jordan valley. In the mountains the months of harvest are June and July. I need hardly say that a thunderstorm<sup>13</sup> in such a season would be rare enough to be a sign of special divine intervention. The harvest

<sup>10</sup> Deut. 6:11.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth 2:23; Exod. 9:31, 32.

<sup>11</sup> The season described in Cant. 2:11-13.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Sam. 12:17; Prov. 26:1.



is a busy time indeed, the busiest in the year, and it often seems as if the people make up for their winter's sleep and laziness by working day and night.<sup>14</sup> The corn is cut with a rough sickle, the straw being half left and half gathered. The great bundles are carried on camels or donkeys to the village threshing-floor, usually a bare, flat piece of rock, the larger the better, exposed as much as possible to the winds of heaven. The corn is then thrown, with a large percentage of the straw, upon the threshing-floor, and the long and primitive process of threshing is commenced. Day after day animals, two, three, or even more, yoked



PALM ON THE PLAIN OF JEZREEEL

together, are driven round and round over the straw, dragging after them a rough board covered on its under surface with some bits of stone, or nails, or other irregularities. The boy, often a mere child, who guides the cattle, sits on the board, and seems to enjoy his task very much—tedious as it seems to us. The poor beasts are allowed to help themselves freely as they work.<sup>15</sup> The threshing-floor is often a merry<sup>16</sup> and always a lively place. Its primitive happiness is not uncommonly, however, much marred by the farmer of taxes, who, like the publican in Roman times, has bought the taxes and tries to make as much as he can out of them. He often lives in a tent at one side of the threshing-floor, watching lest any of the grain be removed before the division takes place—for he is paid in kind—and as he feeds his horses at the expense of the village, the inhabitants will frequently prefer to be heavily overcharged rather than to entertain their expensive guest for a longer time.

After several weeks the grain and straw are all reduced to a fine mixture ready for winnowing. This process is accomplished by throwing the mixture into the air when a strong wind is blowing, often in the evening or night; the heavier grains fall in a heap at the winnowers' feet, and the chaff is gathered in an irregular

<sup>14</sup> Prov. 10 : 5.

<sup>15</sup> Deut. 25 : 4.

<sup>16</sup> Isa. 9 : 3.

pile near. The grain-heap rises day by day. If ever left, the owner of that particular lot will carefully smooth it into such a shape that he will be able to detect the abstraction of the smallest quantity. At length the grain is all gathered, and the share for the tax collector—nominally a tenth, but often a fifth



MAN WINNOWING GRAIN  
[NEIL, *Pictured Palestine*]

or more—is paid. The wheat is then sifted, and after being washed, and dried on the housetops, is gathered into the garners,<sup>17</sup> while the chaff or *tibn* is burned, after a small proportion has been set aside for cattle food. It is an extravagant custom, as this finely broken-up straw is valuable for many purposes. Nevertheless, after the harvest you will often find fires of burning chaff rising from every village threshing-floor.

As I have said, first comes the barley harvest, then the wheat,

and, in vine-growing districts, after this comes the vintage and the wine-making. The primitive stone-cut wine-presses, in which the juice is trodden out by the naked feet, are still often used.

For making olive oil, the olives are beaten down from the trees and carried to the oil mills, where they are crushed and the oil extracted. Grain and wine, grapes and olives, figs and pomegranates—such are the products of the country today, and so it has been for millenniums.

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 3 : 12.